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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [AR](#)
SUBJECT: ARGENTINA: CAMPAIGNING K STYLE

REF: A. BUENOS AIRES 0360 AND PREVIOUS
[1](#)B. BUENOS AIRES 0561
[1](#)C. BUENOS AIRES 0443

Classified By: DCM Kelly for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d).

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: With congressional midterm elections less than a month away, campaign season is in full swing throughout Argentina. In Buenos Aires province, the key electoral district in the June 28 race, principal candidates of the three main electoral forces -- the Kirchner-allied ruling Victory Front (FpV), the Peronist dissidents backed by Republican Proposal (PRO), and the Radical Party-Civic Coalition (UCR-CC) alliance -- are busy traversing the province in an effort to motivate the party faithful and win over voters. This cable focuses on the FpV's campaign style and will be followed by septel reports on the Peronist dissident and UCR-CC campaigns. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's (CFK) decision in mid-March to move up congressional elections by four months to June 28 forced Argentine political parties into over-drive (ref A). Parties met a May 9 deadline to register candidates (ref B) and are now campaigning hard. On May 14, the Kirchner-allied ruling Victory Front (FpV) formally launched its campaign in the capital city of La Plata in Buenos Aires (BA) province. From the stage of La Plata's well-known theater, Argentina's former President, current Peronist party (PJ) head Nestor Kirchner (NK) announced his candidacy for national deputy in Buenos Aires province before a crowd of 2,000, which included his wife, President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner (CFK). NK will lead the FpV's slate in the province followed by Buenos Aires province Governor Daniel Scioli.

[1](#)3. (SBU) With an eye to winning the key electoral battleground of BA province (ref C), NK has called on Governor Scioli, Cabinet Chief Sergio Massa, and some 45 Kirchner-allied mayors to run for congressional or city council seats, which they are not expected to fill, in order to boost the FpV's electoral prospects. The press and opposition have called such candidacies "symbolic candidates" ("candidatos testimoniales"). The Radical party (UCR) filed in court on May 11 a legal challenge to the candidacies of NK, Scioli, and Massa. As expected, Buenos Aires province federal judge Manuel Blanco rejected on May 20 the UCR's challenge, a ruling that was upheld by the National Electoral Court on June 1. Local papers indicate that the opposition will now take its case to the Supreme Court, but it is unlikely the Court will address the issue prior to the elections. Scioli, after initially publicly admitting that he would not assume the national deputy seat if elected, has since changed tactics, responding vaguely to press inquiries and submitting a writ before the electoral court saying he would "eventually" assume his seat. As to NK's plans, during his first television interview as a candidate, the PJ president had a one-word response to whether he would assume the national deputy seat: "obviously."

Kirchner's Focus: Buenos Aires Province

¶4. (SBU) Since announcing his candidacy on May 9, NK has been campaigning on a nearly daily basis in BA province, focusing his efforts on Greater Buenos Aires, where 64% of the province's voters reside. Over the past three weeks, the FpV's leading candidate, accompanied by an entourage of local candidates, advisers, and cameras, has visited nearly a dozen key cities in the province's western, southern, and northern districts.

Meet Nestor the Candidate

¶5. (C) In a much-noted effort to soften his aggressive image in the run-up to the elections, NK has been seen visiting voters in their homes, kissing babies, and strolling the streets with a wide grin and waving. The strategy appears to be working. An Embassy contact, whose firm has advised Argentine opposition campaigns, notes that this is the first time BA voters have the opportunity to see NK's campaign style and explained that the relatively unknown NK was elected president in 2003 after a short presidential race due to Argentina's politically and financially turbulent times. The consultant adds that, according to his firm's unpublished late May polling, NK's approval rating has improved by six points in the province over the last month as a result of his extensive campaigning in the province. Nonetheless, in his campaign rhetoric about the prospect of the FpV losing its congressional majority, Nestor Kirchner alternates between invoking gloom-and-doom scenarios and occasional bouts of equanimity.

¶6. (SBU) Often at NK's side during these campaign stops are the chief of Argentina's Intelligence Secretariat (SIDE), Hector Icazuriaga, and NK's sister, Minister of Social Development Alicia Kirchner. Icazuriaga, NK's former vice-governor in Santa Cruz province and a close confidant of NK, is well-known to many of the province's Kirchner-allied FpV mayors. Icazuriaga often arrives a few minutes before each event and accompanies NK in his door-to-door walks, according to paper-of-record "La Nacion." Local press reports assert that NK has used SIDE to smear his closest opponent, Peronist dissident Francisco de Narvaez, by trying to link him to ephedrine trafficking (septel). "La Nacion" notes that Alicia Kirchner, along with a small team of note-taking advisers, often accompanies NK to poor neighborhoods to record citizens' complaints and to ensure follow-up on their concerns.

FPV Message: Action Speaks Louder than Words...

¶7. (SBU) The FpV's campaign propaganda and its candidates from NK to the town council level are sending the same simple message: vote for the FpV and the GOA will continue to spend locally on public works. Campaign propaganda asserts "we defend what we have done in order to continue doing more," claiming to voters that it is the FpV that brought them "jobs, hospitals, roads, potable water, (and) sewers." Local observers point out that the Kirchners are well-known for their penchant for announcing and re-announcing public works projects, a trend which has increased during this campaign season. In recent weeks, the government, often prior to, after, or concurrent with a campaign act, has announced new public works or initiatives, such as the construction of a hospital, a new highway, a credit line for house purchases, and credits for wheat producers. Although CFK has not accompanied NK on the campaign trail, she has sought to underscore the FpV's campaign message by traveling to Neuquen and Misiones provinces and to the coastal city of Mar del Plata in Buenos Aires province to announce key public works and to tout the government's accomplishments. (Note: Detractors argue that the Kirchners have announced some projects a half-dozen times without results.)

But are Voters buying it?

¶18. (SBU) Official media campaigns began the week of May 25. The FpV's prime-time ad, which made its debut the week of May 25, features various individuals holding signs which say "before...there were no jobs...there was no money." The silent ad concludes with "we do not speak because we take action while others talk." Another ad boasts that the Kirchner administration has built hundreds of new schools, hospitals, and roads throughout the country. However, when one asks the average BA voter if they have noticed such infrastructure improvements, they say it must have all been built in the Kirchners' hometown province of Santa Cruz.

¶19. (C) Poloff recently observed first-hand the FpV's public works strategy in action during a visit to Avellaneda, an industrial city in the "conurbano" bordering the Federal Capital. Avellaneda's Mayor Baldomero Alvarez de Olivera invited poloff to accompany him to a "town-hall" meeting with retirees and pensioners. The Mayor is among some 45 Kirchner-allied mayors running in the June 28 elections as symbolic town council candidates. For two hours, the Mayor participated in a frank question-and-answer session with some thirty retirees from his boyhood neighborhood on topics ranging from trash pick-up and tree cutting to crime concerns. At the end of the session, he asserted: "We want to win on June 28, but if we lose, you can say goodbye to all (these and future) public works."

Press Strategy: Keep Interviews Among Friends

¶10. (SBU) While highly distrustful of the press, both NK and CFK have granted friendly interviews that have focused on the government's achievements. NK has given three media interviews since early May, one with Argentine television station "Telefe" on May 8, and radio interviews on May 20 and May 28. Meanwhile, CFK was interviewed on May 20 during the premier of Argentine actress Soledad Silveyra's new program on "Telefe" channel. During an Embassy reception last week, local journalists referred to this interview as a sham and complained that neither CFK nor NK grant interviews where they do not control the message. NK continues to ignore opposition calls for a televised debate.

¶11. (SBU) NK's softer candidate image is reinforced in the highly popular television show "Gran Cunado" ("Big Brother-in-law"). This political satire program, which will run bi-weekly through the elections, parodies reality television shows by impersonating Argentina's key political leaders, including NK and CFK, who one by one are voted off the show by viewers. The impersonation of NK is flattering, presenting him as a friendly, approachable, yet somewhat goofy candidate. The more positive impersonation of NK stands in striking contrast to the imitation of Vice-President Julio Cobos as a weak, timid, indecisive leader caught in the moment of his tie-breaking vote against CFK's bill to raise agricultural taxes. Embassy contacts have noted that the top-rated show's more positive portrayal of NK and others demonstrates the leverage they have over show director Marcelo Tinelli.

A Harder Sell for the FpV in the Province's Interior

¶12. (SBU) Campaigning in the province's mostly rural interior has been difficult for the FpV. As a result of the protracted conflict with the farm sector, the FpV has lost much of the interior's support which voted for CFK in the 2007 presidential race. In one highly-publicized incident, farm sector supporters pelted BA Governor Scioli with eggs while he campaigned in the province's interior. In response, Scioli told the press that protestors would have to kill him to keep him from working. According to press reports, Scioli plans to brave the fields and campaign again this week in the same district where he was pelted with eggs. NK referred to the farm sector supporters involved in the incident as

"fascist gangs."

¶13. (SBU) The week before, NK himself was met with protests from the farm sector when he delivered a campaign speech in Chacabuco district. That same week, rural supporters in the Coronel Suarez district manifested their disapproval of the Mayor's alignment with the Kirchners by painting graffiti on his house just a few hours before CFK's visit. "La Nacion" reports that NK returned to the interior on June 2, campaigning in Canuelas district, to demonstrate that the presidential couple can travel freely to the province's rural areas. Some provincial mayors, out of concern that the Kirchners' low popularity may affect their own, have begun to distance themselves from the Kirchners, preferring not to invoke the Kirchner name in their campaign propaganda. (Note: CFK's positive image nationwide is at 37% while NK's is at 33%, according to May polling by IPSOS.)

Comment

¶14. (C) Although the Kirchners are focusing on BA province, in particular the Greater Buenos Aires, so far, the polls continue to show the race to be a statistical dead heat between the FpV and its closest competitors, the Peronist dissidents. But, in BA province if nowhere else, the Kirchners seem to have the momentum. Contacts in the De Narvaez-Macri-Sola camp have started to tell us that they expect to lose by a few percentage points. For two decades, the PJ has dominated provincial politics, and despite the party's current divisions, NK, as PJ President still controls the party and its local network. As a result, the Peronist dissidents still have an uphill battle if they hope to come out ahead in this key electoral battleground, where even local observers are hesitant to call this close race.

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